

Trevor Ncube's brave new Zimbabwe

By Gill Moodie: [@grubstreetZA](#)

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Trevor Ncube, the owner of the [Mail & Guardian](#) newspaper, has leaped back into the brave new world that is Zimbabwe today with a new daily newspaper, [NewsDay](#). The Zimbabwean publisher and entrepreneur, who remained a thorn in Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe's side with his two weekly newspaper even after he left Zimbabwe, talks to Bizcommunity.com about the business of launching a paper in a wrecked economy.



Bizcommunity: *The first South African media folk really knew about NewsDay was that the Zimbabwean Media Commission granted permission for new newspapers in the country and then a week later (on 7 June 2010), you launched NewsDay. I would imagine that you had been preparing for this for quite some time?*

Trevor Ncube: Yes, which is why we have basically been able to hit the ground running. We have had over the past 12 months a core team to which we've been adding as we thought the prospects were improving for us to be registered [by the commission]. For me, the turning point was the inclusive government [with Morgan Tsvangirai as prime minister]. When I saw it being put in place and in it there was a strong component about freeing up of the media, that was the window that I was looking for and I said: "This is our time; we've always wanted to do this." So we started preparations then.

Biz: *And this was about a year ago?*

Ncube: Yes, on 15 September last year. That's when we really started putting together a business plan in earnest and asking ourselves: "What do we need?" One of the first things I identified was that we needed was a printing press because we didn't have one.



Screen capture of [NewsDay](#) website.

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Biz: *What have you been printing on up till now?*

Ncube: We owned 25% of a printing press but we were not in charge of the management of that printing press.

Biz: *May I ask who is 'we'?*

Ncube: I shouldn't use 'we'. Alpha Media Holdings is the company that publishes *NewsDay*. I control 61% of that company and we publish two other weeklies [in Zimbabwe]: the *Zimbabwean Independent*, which is a business weekly, and *The Standard*, which is a Sunday newspaper. We have a printing company that does commercial printing and we've just added a newspaper web press to that. The first challenge in buying the web press was the fundraising. The second was to go out and find the press.

Biz: *Which is a big deal. Did you have to go to Europe?*

Ncube: We went to the Netherlands. We found one there and we did it in record time. We also had to identify a building (in Harare) that could accommodate a printing press but there wasn't one. We had to build a new factory for the press, with a purpose-built foundations so that it doesn't shake and so on.

Biz: *The web press itself must have cost about R40 or R50 million?*

Ncube: No, it wasn't exactly a brand new press but, ja, it wasn't cheap. And then we had to ship it. Identifying the press

and shipping it into Durban, building the press and putting it in - we did it in a record six months.

Biz: *That's amazing. The standard is about 18 months, isn't it?*

Ncube: Yes, and our factory is one of the best printing press facilities that I've seen in the world - immaculately staffed, which tells us that there are still skills in Zimbabwe. When I went into that printing press I was so proud...

To get the printers, we poached from other printers but we also found unemployed people. Industry in Zimbabwe is running at between 20% and 30% of capacity and unemployment is around 80% or 90% depending on who you listen to. So there are a lot of skilled people who don't have jobs and we managed to find the printers and specialised people to man the press.

The next challenge was to find the editorial people and production people, people in accounts, sales and in distribution... We have had a core staff of about 12 people, looking at layouts and design for the newspaper, and also looking around in the market to see who's available and who's not available.

We own our own distribution company - that's the advantage that we have. One thing that 20 years in this business has taught me is that, in African countries, it's important that you control your own printing and distribution if you are to be a serious player.

Biz: *Why do you say that?*

Ncube: Most publishers go out of business because they get fleeced by printers who don't understand publishers and who are simply out there to milk them. The same goes for distribution. In Africa the infrastructure is simply not there. You can count the countries on one hand that have distribution infrastructure - people who understand the importance of distributing newspapers. I say to people that newspapers are just like tomatoes. They need to get to the market as soon as possible. If they don't, they are useless.

Biz: *Would you include South Africa in this example?*

Ncube: Absolutely. Look at what happened to [the Nigerian-funded daily broadsheet] *ThisDay*, for instance. [It collapsed](#) (in 2004), largely because its competitors controlled its distribution and it didn't control its own printing. *ThisDay* had daily deadlines of about 4pm or 5pm because they were printing on *The Star's* press [in Johannesburg].

Biz: *I believe that before publication you printed dummy versions of NewsDay in your other papers, The Standard and the Zimbabwean Independent?*

Ncube: Yes, it was strange but it worked. We were printing four pages in our business paper every Friday in the *Zimbabwean Independent*. And every Sunday, we had four pages of *NewsDay*. The government didn't say anything about it, even though *NewsDay* wasn't yet registered. It was a very good training ground for our staff and it also helped push the brand into the market. For the past six months that we've been doing this, people have been talking about *NewsDay* before it arrived.

Biz: *I would imagine that you've got a pile of cash built up in Zimbabwe [from the Zimbabwean titles and Mail & Guardian sales] because you haven't been able to get it out?*

Ncube: No, not for the Zimbabwean papers. But the *Mail & Guardian* has had money trapped there for a while because it's a foreign newspaper.

Biz: *The [South African] Sunday Times has been publishing a Zimbabwean edition of the paper for a while and before that, a southern African edition of the Sunday Times was sold in the country for many years. I've heard people say that this is farsighted of its publishers, Avusa, because when the Zimbabwean media and economy is liberalised, it will be well-positioned to grow. In a way that day has come, hasn't it?*

Ncube: Yes, that day has come. It was a clever thing for it to do. It is in Zim with a Zimbabwean edition but I don't know how well it will work. I don't know if Zimbabweans will really take to the *Sunday Times*.

Biz: *I suppose when it comes to independent daily newspapers, you guys are first to market?*

Ncube: Exactly, but the most important thing is that there was a time when Zimbabweans wanted South African newspapers because, firstly, there was a sense that Zimbabwean newspapers were censored. Secondly, Zimbabweans bought South African newspaper because they wanted jobs - they wanted the recruitment sections of the papers. So the dividend that people are hoping of getting out of the Zimbabwean market might not be as lucrative as it's made out to be. At the end of the day, I think that if local newspapers get their acts right, they will be difficult to beat. It's going to be very interesting to see how the Zimbabwean edition of the *Sunday Times* performs.

Biz: *We know there are other companies wanting to launch independent newspapers in Zimbabwe but how many papers can an economy such as Zimbabwe's support?*

Ncube: The readers are hungry for independent news but it is important to realise that the majority of Zimbabweans are in the rural areas. The urban population is between 25% and what could now be as high as 40% of the population. That's a challenge that any publisher who wishes to achieve economies of scale faces. How do you penetrate that other 60%?

At the moment there is the government-controlled daily *Zimbabwean Herald*, there is ourselves and there will be the [independent] *Daily News*, which we hear will be coming up [to launching] pretty soon - maybe in July or thereabouts. I think the size of Zimbabwe's economy would not be able to support more than three daily newspapers of any useful size. There isn't the advertising cake to go around.

Biz: *Speaking of that, what kind of advertising is NewsDay getting?*

Ncube: There is advertising. To give you an example, with our weeklies we run 64-page papers. We started *NewsDay* with 32 pages and we are achieving advertising ratios of 30%. Our budget was 10% so we are already exceeding that.

I think people outside Zimbabwe don't understand that the economy was a very vibrant, robust one before it was dealt this terrible blow. But, still, it remains quite resilient. It's a pretty sophisticated economy that has been starved of the necessary ingredients that any modern economy requires. We have sophisticated financial institutions and banking instruments. Mining is huge. The mobile market is there and cellphone advertising is quite aggressive. So the advertising cake is there but it's depressed.

The numbers I'm giving you here [for the weeklies] are probably between 30% and 40% off what we were 10 years ago. But it's beginning to pick up. The silver lining is that the introduction of the US dollar as a currency has done amazing things in terms of bringing about predictability. We no longer have ridiculous inflation numbers so people can plan and borrow and business is beginning to settle down.

Biz: *Excuse my ignorance - which is probably the ignorance of the average South African - but I thought all the independent newspapers were run out of town by the Mugabe regime.*

Ncube: My newspapers have been around for 15 years and, if you know me, you'll know I wouldn't run a newspaper that is censored by the government. These are very independent newspapers. At the moment, one of my editors is facing a 20-year jail term and that is the kind of thing we've endured: Publish and be damned; publish and be imprisoned. My papers have been very critical of president Robert Mugabe, which is why in 2005 my passport was taken away from me. And in 2006, [they took away my citizenship](#).

My two newspaper performed the role of the opposition. It was a small weekly voice in a market crowded with government propaganda. Nonetheless, the two newspaper gave Zimbabweans hope. It was the platform for Zimbabweans to express themselves and their fears and frustrations with the government.

Biz: How many editorial people do you have at NewsDay?

Ncube: At the moment we are sitting at 30 people.

Biz: And where are you finding journalists as there's been such a brain drain from Zimbabwe.

Ncube: It's a combination. One or two people have come from the diaspora, which is very interesting. This is another thing people don't realise: Zimbabweans are coming back home. They are tired of being treated like second-class citizens in South Africa and everywhere else... People are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. I'm getting Twitter, Facebook and email enquiries from people who are wanting to come back. We also poached from existing establishments and there are journalists in Zimbabwe who have been on the streets as five papers were closed by the government. Some have been freelancing but often that's not good enough to support your family. So we're picking and choosing.

Biz: So where is NewsDay positioned?

Ncube: We look at *NewsDay* almost as you look at *The Times* [in SA]. We want to appeal to LSMs 5, 6, 7 [and] up to 10. It's certainly not going to be down-market but we want to be able to talk to the serious reader in the township so there's a big drive to get into the townships. It's for your blue-collar and executive workers who want a daily record of what took place yesterday but who are also interested in analysis and independent reportage of news...

The one commodity that Zimbabwe lacks right now is hope. We want *NewsDay* to help Zimbabweans get that hope back again - the reason to believe that I can go to bed tonight and I can get up tomorrow and I'll have opportunities. We also see *NewsDay's* duty as participating in national healing and nation building...

Right now Zimbabwe is split into two: those that are pro-Zanu PF and those that are anti-Zanu PF. There are high intolerance levels on both sides and we can't move as a nation with this kind of paralysis. We want *NewsDay* to be the paper that sits in the middle and is seen as a mirror via which both sides look at each other.

- Follow Trevor Ncube and *NewsDay* on Twitter at [@TrevorNcube](#) and [@NewsDayZimbabwe](#).

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